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ABSTRACT

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Technical Report No. 535

PREPARING TEACHERS OF LITERACY

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Abstract

The Language and Literacy Block is an attempt to improve the preparation of elementary teachers to teach literacy. It is a component of a year-long preservice teacher education program that is a collaborative enterprise between the University of Illinois and a local school district. Some key features of the Language and Literacy Block include: (a) joint planning and implementation by university and school faculty; (b) an integrated approach to teaching language by combining reading methods, language arts methods, and children's literature; and (c) situated learning to teach literacy, partially accomplished through the use of videotaped student lessons.

PREPARING TEACHERS OF LITERACY

One way to attack literacy-related problems in this nation is to do a better job of preparing teachers of literacy. Working collaboratively, faculty members of the College of Education at the University of Illinois and teachers in a local school district have crafted an innovative year-long preservice teacher education program to do just that. In this report, we will describe one component of that program, which we call the Language and Literacy Block.

Problems of Traditional Teacher Education

We developed the program in an effort to redress two major problems of preservice teacher education identified by research: the limited connection between teacher preparation and the real world of schooling (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986; Goodlad, 1990; Holmes Group, 1986, 1990), and the weakness of coursework and field experiences.

Theory is divorced from practice in traditional teacher education programs. Prospective teachers see their coursework as unrelated to their field experiences. As the Holmes Group (1990) has noted:

> Teacher education has not been organized to encourage the application of principles to practical experience in classrooms . . . . Prospective teachers are left alone to integrate knowledge, to puzzle through applications, and to resolve contradictions, ambiguities, and tensions. (pp. 47-48)

Not only is there a rift between theory and practice, but coursework and field experiences in traditional programs are often inherently weak. Many university professors violate the very principles of effective teaching they espouse, while delivering content ill-suited to the needs of prospective teachers. Coursework is often disjointed, unconnected by common themes or philosophies. Although usually valued more highly than coursework, field experiences, too, are frequently weak. They offer only cursory opportunities for students to observe and practice teaching in cooperating schools, and they provide inadequate opportunities for students to receive feedback and coaching.

A School-University Collaboration to Improve Teacher Education

Responding to the cry for reform in teacher education, the College of Education at the University of Illinois in the late 1980s joined with the Urbana, Illinois (District #116), public schools in a collaborative endeavor to improve elementary teacher education. The program evolved over two years of joint planning by school and university personnel. Collaboration extended through all aspects of the program--development, instruction, governance, and supervision/evaluation.

Prospective teachers in the program spend their entire senior year in the Urbana schools. They are in classrooms approximately 18 hours per week--30 hours per week during the last 10 weeks of the year. (This is about 2-1/2 times the classroom experience of students in the traditional teacher education program at the University of Illinois.) They begin their classroom experience the week before the children return to school in the fall. They are thus part of the "behind the scenes" action involved in preparing for a new school year, an experience unavailable to most prospective teachers.

Students in the program have field experiences in a variety of classrooms during the year. For their first semester, they split their time between primary and intermediate classrooms in one school. They spend the second semester in a different school and at a different grade level. Students in the program thus gain a much broader perspective on schooling than is possible from the single classroom experience of the typical preservice teacher.

The Language and Literacy Block

As with the other methods blocks in the program, the Language and Literacy (L & L) block is developed and taught by an instructional team consisting of both university and school faculty. As members of the L & L team, the authors of this report (two university faculty members and one adjunct faculty member, who is an experienced school teacher on leave from teaching) work with three experienced Urbana teachers representing various grade levels.

We began initial development of the L & L block during the summer of 1989, when the team members shared philosophy, theory, methods, and resources as we worked out a plan for teaching the block. Rather than being dictated by the university faculty, the plan was guided by what the teachers thought were essential knowledge and skills needed by elementary teachers.

One key feature of the curriculum that evolved is its integrated approach to teaching language. Recognizing that language--reading, writing, listening, speaking--is learned holistically in a social and cultural context, the L & L block combines coursework that is often taught separately in the traditional curriculum: reading methods, language arts methods, and children's literature. A sample of topics from the curriculum includes emerging literacy, beginning reading instruction, reading comprehension and reading-to-learn, the process approach to writing, reading and writing across the curriculum, children's literature, and managing a literature-based classroom. Students complete a number of projects requiring them to integrate literacy experiences, including classroom observations, journal writing, and, most important, planning and teaching lessons.

An instructional philosophy also emerged through the collaborative planning of the instructional team. One major tenet of that philosophy is that learning is situated: People learn from acting in authentic contexts. Therefore, practice in the actual situation of teaching is essential to becoming an expert teacher (Anderson, Armbruster, & Roe, 1990).

Another tenet of the philosophy is that instruction must move the learner toward independence (Pearson & Fielding, 1991). This is accomplished through *scaffolding*, or the regulation of task difficulty to meet the changing needs of the learner (Bruner, 1978). As learners become more proficient, task difficulty is increased and the amount of teacher support is decreased.

The teacher initially provides a great deal of support in the form of *explanation and modeling*, in which the process is made as explicit and accessible as possible so that learners can develop a conceptual model of the task before attempting to execute it. For example, early in the year, our L & L students view a number of professional videotapes of expert teaching (Anderson & Au, 1991) in which the teachers not only model specific methods but also explain and reflect on their teaching.

To help students gradually assume more responsibility for performing the task, our teachers provide *coaching*, offering feedback, hints, and suggestions as students practice the task. For example, one member of our instructional team, the teacher-on-leave, makes regular classroom visits to coach students as they teach literacy lessons. Her coaching consists of detailed feedback on the positive and negative aspects of the lesson, along with specific suggestions shared with the student in an immediate debriefing session. Opportunities for *articulation* and *reflection* are important in fostering growth toward independence. Articulation refers to getting students to verbalize their knowledge, reasoning, or problem-solving strategies so that they can gain consciousness and control over these developing cognitive processes. Articulation sets the stage for reflection, which involves comparing one's own understandings with those of an expert or another student, and eventually an internalized model of expertise. The purpose of articulation and reflection is to develop individuals who can monitor their own performance, and if necessary, align it more closely with expert performance.

One way we encourage the L & L students to articulate and reflect on their developing expertise as teachers is through dialogue journals. In the journals, they correspond with us about the relationship between what they are learning and what they are experiencing in their classrooms. The dialogue journals thus document the reflections of developing teachers.

These tenets of instruction are exemplified in one of the major elements of the L & L block--the use of videotaped student lessons.

The Videotape Project

In the videotape project, L & L students videotape each other conducting three literacy lessons--one in each of the three classrooms to which they are assigned during the year. There are several parts to a videotape assignment. First, before teaching, students write a fairly detailed lesson plan. Right after the lesson, they view the videotape and prepare a log of educationally significant events; from the log they target 15-20 minutes of instruction as the focus for discussion. Then the students write a self-evaluation, including both high and low points of the lesson. Next, they view and discuss the videotape with their cooperating teacher. The student takes notes on the cooperating teacher's feedback and later writes a summary of the interchange. Students submit their lesson plan, the log of significant events, the two evaluations, and the videotape itself.

The students, along with the entire instructional team, spend at least two hours each week viewing and discussing these lessons. Over the two years the program has existed, a successful format for conducting the discussions has evolved. The student teacher whose lesson is to be discussed begins by giving some background information, including the school and grade in which he or she is teaching, a description of the students in the class or group, and an overview of the lesson itself. Then the target segment of the lesson is shown. After the viewing, each student in the class spends about five minutes writing a response to the lesson, focusing on strengths and suggestions. (We avoid the term "weaknesses," emphasizing instead "alternative approaches.") Next, the student teacher comments on his or her own lesson, beginning with the strengths and then moving to other approaches that could have been used. Then the class is opened to general discussion. Because the students tend to be quite supportive of each other, the tone is almost always gentle, positive, and constructive. As members of the instructional team, we try to hold our comments until the students' comments have begun to wane. By then we often find that our points have been covered anyway. At the conclusion of the discussion, the student teacher receives written feedback from the other members of the class.

The videotape project captures the instructional tenets of the L & L block. The lessons are an occasion for situated learning because the students are teaching real lessons to real students in real classrooms. Scaffolding occurs through limiting teaching to a single lesson and providing a structured assignment.

The videotape sessions provide many opportunities for *modelling*. Although the teacher on the tape is not an experienced teacher, modelling of good instruction occurs surprisingly often. Peers see methods, materials, children, contexts, and situations on videotape that they do not have the opportunity to see in person. Both the strong and not-so-strong aspects of the teaching are made explicit during the discussion. Alternative approaches are discussed and sometimes modelled on the spot.

The videotape sessions provide prime opportunities for *coaching* from several coaches. The first coach for the lesson is, appropriately, the cooperating teacher, who knows the most about the context, the lesson, and the student teacher. Another source of coaching is the student teacher's peers, who offer feedback in written evaluations, during discussion, and often informally after class. Finally, coaching comes from the instructional team members, with their multiple perspectives on the lesson.

The videotaped lessons also provide several occasions for *articulation* and *reflection*. Student teachers must verbalize their thinking and ponder their thoughts and actions in writing up the lesson, discussing it with the cooperating teacher, and presenting it to the class. The other students must also articulate and reflect as they write their feedback and participate in discussion about the lesson. The discussion provides an occasion for each student to compare his or her own understandings and beliefs with those of other students and the instructional team members.

Reflections on L & L

In his study of teacher education, Goodlad argues that if teacher education is to improve, "the goal is to join theory and practice in every component of a future teacher's preparation" (1990, p. 300). We agree. In the year-long teacher education program as a whole, and in the L & L block in particular, we try to do just that.

We have anecdotal evidence that the prospective teachers recognize and value the strong theory-practice link. An article about the program in a local newspaper reported the following:

> Students said they benefit from learning how to teach and teaching at the same time.
>
> "It seems so much more effective to be able to try something in class the day after you learn it," said senior Kevin Skomer.
>
> Senior Christy Cornell recalled watching teacher Gloria Rainer use a certain technique with students at Martin Luther King School.
>
> "Everything she was doing was what I had read 12 to 15 hours earlier," Cornell said. (Wurth, 1991, p. A-3)

In an evaluation of L & L class in particular, another student commented, "I think that the theory I learned in class would not have sunk in as well as it did if I had not been involved in an actual classroom at the same time."

L & L students particularly value the contribution of the videotape project to their professional development. Many of their comments on a survey question asking for "specific experiences in your language and literacy course that were most useful" mentioned the videotape project. For example,

> "Videotapes were very helpful because they gave me a chance to reflect on the quality, appropriateness, and applicability of various teaching methods."
>
> "Getting videotaped--you learn a lot seeing yourself teach and hearing constructive criticism. You had the chance to see other teaching situations and talk through situations that were giving you trouble."

And, from a dialogue journal, "I appreciated every comment and suggestion. If anything, I've learned the importance of feedback from the video projects." Teachers on the instructional team also offer favorable comments, for example, "They'd never get all these experiences in one classroom" (Wurth, 1991, p. A-3).

What's in the future? The program itself is continuing to expand. The number of students who choose to enroll has increased each year. The program will move into a second school district next year, with other school districts targeted for the future. We are also exploring creative ways to finance the program.

The L & L block is continuously evolving. We actively seek feedback about the course through both informal and formal evaluations from students, instructional team members, and from other colleagues

on the project. We solicit opinions informally through dialogue journals, class discussions, and conversations. Formal evaluations while students are still enrolled include a standard university course evaluation form as well as two other surveys, one which is completed by all program participants, and one by students only. We are currently evaluating students who completed the first year of the program. Because we were unable to find what we regarded as satisfactory methods for evaluating practicing teachers, we are currently piloting some evaluation methods of our own design. We follow up on our students during their first year of teaching and compare them to other first-year teachers in the same school or at least in the same district. We interview these first-year teachers about their teaching and their preparation for teaching. We videotape them teaching a literacy lesson and have them discuss the lesson. We interview principals about their performance.

The evaluations completed to date (while students are still enrolled) have been encouraging. For example, on the student survey administered during the first year of the program, L & L students rated their preparation in reading, language arts, and children's literature significantly higher than did students in the traditional teacher education program at the University of Illinois.

Nonetheless, the L & L block is not without its problems. As currently staffed, with a high ratio of instructors to students, the block is expensive. There has been relatively high turnover of teachers on the instructional team, apparently because of heavy time commitment without recompense. Students complain about the demanding work load and the lack of coordination with the other methods blocks. Initially, they are intimidated by being videotaped and by being "on stage" during discussion.

We have used, and will continue to use, evaluation results as the basis for revising and improving the course. Together with our colleagues in the schools, we are confident that we can prepare better teachers of literacy for our nation's schools.

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